

Amendments to the Claims:

The listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

Claim 1 (Currently Amended): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product, the method comprising:

placing a food product having an outer surface on an advancement mechanism; providing a steam sleeve for generating a flow of steam having selected properties to treat the outer surface of the food product, the steam sleeve having an entrance and an exit;

passing the food product in a feed direction through the steam sleeve using the advancement mechanism, the food product having a length greater than a length of the steam sleeve such that the food product at least partially blocks both the entrance and exit during at last part of the step of passing the food product through the steam sleeve; and

generating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve while the food product is passing therethrough, the flow of steam contacting the outer surface of the food product for treatment of the outer surface of the food product.

Claim 2 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 1, wherein the step of generating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve while the food product is passing therethrough includes the step of circulating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve within a channel formed in an interior of the sleeve having an inlet for introduction of the steam into the sleeve and an outlet for removal of the steam and condensate from the sleeve.

Claim 3 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 2, wherein the channel is generally circular and aligned perpendicular relative to a longitudinal axis of the food product, and the step of circulating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve within a channel includes the step of introducing the steam into the entrance of the channel with a tangential velocity effective to generate a circular flow directing at least some of the steam condensation away from the outer surface of the food product.

Claim 4 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 3, wherein the step of circulating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve comprises directing the flow of steam through a helical channel.

Claim 5 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 4 wherein the step of directing the flow of steam through a helical channel includes positioning the inlet and outlet so that the flow of steam from entrance to exit of the sleeve is in a general direction opposite to that of the feed direction of the food product.

Claim 6 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 4, including the step of providing more than one set of helical channels each having their own inlet for introduction of the steam into the sleeve and outlet for removal of the steam from the sleeve.

Claim 7 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 6, including the step of positioning the inlet and outlet of one of the helical channels so that the flow of steam is in a general direction opposite to that of the feed direction of the food product and positioning the inlet and outlet of another of the helical channels so that the flow of steam is in the same general direction as that of the feed direction of the food product.

Claim 8 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 1, wherein the step of passing the food product in a feed direction through the steam sleeve using the advancement mechanism includes the step of forming a substantial seal between the outer surface of the food product and at least one of the entrance and exit of the steam sleeve using a generally flexible wiper element.

Claim 9 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 1, wherein the step of passing the food product in a feed direction through the steam sleeve using the advancement mechanism includes the step of continuously advancing the food product with the advancement mechanism during the step of generating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve.

Claim 10 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 3, wherein the step of circulating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve within a channel having an inlet for introduction of the steam into the sleeve and an outlet for removal of the steam and condensate from the sleeve includes the step of forming multiple single-revolution channels each having their own inlet and outlet.

Claim 11 (Previously Presented): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 1, wherein the passing of the food product in a feed direction through the steam sleeve using the advancement mechanism occurs at a rate, the method including the step of selecting the rate and the selected properties of the fluid to achieve a temperature of surface and immediate depth of the food product effective to provide for slicability of the food product.

Claim 12 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 1, wherein the steps of passing the food product in a feed direction through the steam sleeve using the advancement mechanism generating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve while the food product is passing therethrough occur immediately prior to a slicing station where an end of the food product is sliced.

Claim 13 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 12, wherein a sealing gate is positioned adjacent the exit opening of the steam sleeve, the sealing gate being selectively shiftable between a sealing position substantially closing the exit opening and an unsealing position allowing access to the exit opening.

Claim 14 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 13, including the following steps:

positioning the sealing gate in the sealing position when the food product enters the steam sleeve;

maintaining the sealing gate in the sealing position as a leading face of the food product is advanced through the sleeve during the step of generating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve for treatment of the leading face of the food product; and

shifting the sealing gate from the sealing position to the unsealing position when the leading face of the food product has been advanced proximate thereto to allow the food product to be advanced through the exit opening of the steam sleeve.

Claim 15 (Previously Presented): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 1 including the step of retracting the advancement mechanism away from a trailing face of the food product while the trailing face of the food product is positioned within the steam sleeve for a period of time sufficient to provide steam treatment to the trailing face of the food product prior to advancement of the food product through the exit opening of the steam sleeve with the advancement mechanism.

Claim 16 (Original): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 1, wherein the steps of passing the food product in a feed direction through the steam sleeve using the advancement mechanism generating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve while the food product is passing therethrough occur immediately after a cooling operation where the outer surface of the food product is cooled.

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Claim 17 (Withdrawn): An apparatus for treating the surface of a food product with fluid, the apparatus comprising:

a sleeve having an entrance opening and an exit opening, the entrance and exit openings being sized approximately the same as a cross-sectional profile of the food product;

a plurality of channels formed in an interior of the sleeve between the entrance opening and the exit opening, the channels capable of directing the flow of fluid at least partially around an outer portion of the food product, and at least one of the channels having a fluid inlet and at least one of the channels having a fluid outlet to permit the introduction and removal of the fluid into the sleeve.

Claim 18 (Withdrawn): An apparatus in accordance with claim 17, wherein at least some of the plurality of channels are connected in a generally helical arrangement providing a continuous fluid flow path from the fluid inlet to the fluid outlet.

Claim 19 (Withdrawn): An apparatus in accordance with claim 18, wherein at least two generally helical arrangements of the plurality of channels are provided forming two separate continuous fluid flow paths from fluid inlets to fluid outlets.

Claim 20 (Withdrawn): An apparatus in accordance with claim 17, wherein a seal element is provided proximate at least one of the sleeve entrance and exit openings, the seal element having an opening substantially the same size as the cross-sectional profile of the food product and smaller than the opening of the at least one of the sleeve entrance and exit openings.

Claim 21 (Withdrawn): An apparatus in accordance with claim 20, wherein the entrance opening and exit opening have a shape generally the same as the seal element opening shape.

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Claim 22 (Withdrawn): An apparatus in accordance with claim 20, wherein the entrance opening, exit opening, and seal element openings are all either circular, D-shaped, rectangular, oval or square.

Claim 23 (Withdrawn): An apparatus in accordance with claim 17, wherein the sleeve is formed of a plurality of plates arranged in an adjacent manner, the plates each having an opening therethrough and one of the plurality of channels formed adjacent the opening in an interior of the plate, the channels each having an inlet and an outlet and generally surrounding the plate opening.

Claim 24 (Withdrawn): An apparatus in accordance with claim 23, wherein the channel inlets and outlets of adjacent plates are staggered to define flow paths in adjacent plates having alternating directions.

Claim 25 (Withdrawn): An apparatus in accordance with claim 23, wherein seal elements are positioned between adjacent plates and at least partially define the channels.

Claim 26 (Withdrawn): An apparatus for treating an outer surface of a food product, the apparatus comprising:

means for generating a flow of steam in an interior of a steam sleeve having an entrance and an exit, the steam having selected properties to treat the outer surface of the food product; and

means for advancing a food product having an outer surface in a feed direction through the interior of the steam sleeve between the entrance and exit thereof, the flow of steam in the steam sleeve contacting the outer surface of the food product while the food product is passing therethrough at the predetermined temperature for treating the outer surface of the food product.

Claim 27 (Withdrawn): An apparatus for treating an outer surface of a food product in accordance with claim 26, including means for directing steam condensation away from the outer surface of the food product.

Claim 28 (New): A method of treating an outer surface of a food product, the method comprising:

placing a food product having an outer surface on an advancement mechanism; providing a steam sleeve for generating a flow of steam having selected properties to treat the outer surface of the food product, the steam sleeve having an entrance and an exit;

passing the food product in a feed direction through the steam sleeve using the advancement mechanism; and

generating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve and circulating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve within a channel inwardly open to an interior of the sleeve while the food product is passing therethrough, the flow of steam contacting the outer surface of the food product for treatment of the outer surface of the food product.

Claim 29 (New): The method of claim 28, further including the step of at least partially blocking at least one of the entrance and exits of the steam sleeve using the food product during the step of generating the flow of steam in the steam sleeve.

Claim 30 (New): The method of claim 28, further including circulating the flow of steam in the channel around the perimeter of the product multiple times between an inlet and an outlet of the channel.

Claim 31 (New): The method of claim 28, including the step of circulating the flow of steam in a plurality of channels inwardly open to an interior of the sleeve.